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HEALTHY CHOICES

A year-end exercise program is vital to maintain good health.

Healthy Holidays

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

Dried fruits are a healthy addition to your diet.

While Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons are often associated with unhealthful, excessively rich and sweet foods, there are many good options available to us. First, we must discipline ourselves not to overeat. Sometimes, controlling the volume or amount of food eaten may be more important than the type of food eaten. Smaller portion sizes are really critical. And snacking can really tally up the calories.

Where possible, fruits, frozen berries, tomatoes and a variety of green vegetables, including salads, should be selected to help balance the other less-healthy foods. Baked sweet potato is preferable to Irish potato since the former has health-promoting carotenoids and is also associated with a lower glycemic index.

Apples are rich in soluble fiber and contain a variety of flavonoids that provide protection against cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Winter squashes, including pumpkins, are rich in beta-carotene, lutein and other antioxidant carotenoids that help regulate cell growth. Preliminary research indicates that phytochemicals found in pumpkin may favorably affect insulin and glucose levels. Compounds isolated from pumpkin and fed daily to diabetic rats over six weeks caused significant reductions in blood glucose and blood lipids, indicating improvement in the diabetic condition.

Cranberries are rich in fiber and antioxidants, such as anthocyanins and other flavonoids. These substances limit the growth of cancer cells and encourage them to self-destruct. Animals fed cranberries develop fewer and smaller cancers than those not consuming cranberries.

Nuts and dried fruits make great holiday gift packages. Their use improves the nutritional quality of meals during the holiday season. Polyphenolic antioxidants in dried fruits protect DNA and LDL cholesterol from oxidative damage and lower the risk of cancer and heart disease. Dates have



the highest concentration of polyphenols among the dried fruits while figs and prunes (dried plums) have the highest level of total antioxidants.

Per ounce, dried fruits contain 2–4 gm of fiber but only 70–90 calories. They are rich in potassium (especially apricots) to help lower blood pressure. Figs have the highest calcium and fiber content, and apricots have the best supply of iron. Eating dried fruits produces a significantly lower insulin response than when snacks, such as a cookie or potato chips, are consumed.

It's important to maintain healthy lifestyle choices during the festive days at the year-end since added weight, over the holiday season, can be a challenging and, for some, depressing start to the new year. Sedentary living can be a real killer. In a recent study, the single biggest contributor to heart disease risk in middle-aged women was physical inactivity. Especially in older women, physical activity lowered the risk of heart disease even more than quitting smoking, losing weight or reducing blood pressure.

Engaging in some physical activity gives some health benefits and is better than no activity at all.

After analyzing 43 studies, researchers found that the risk of colon cancer was 54 percent higher for those who spent a lot of time sitting watching TV and 24 percent higher for those who spent the most time sitting at work, compared to those who spent the least time sitting.

Winston J. Craig, Ph.D., RD, lives in Walla Walla, Washington. He is a professor emeritus of nutrition and wellness of Andrews University.